

By Kara Gae Neal

Mission of Mercy Creates Smiles, Hands-on Opportunity for Students

THE CLINIC WAS DESIGNED TO MEET THE CRITICAL NEEDS OF DENTAL PATIENTS OF ALL AGES BY PROVIDING FREE DENTAL CARE TO AS MANY ADULTS AND CHILDREN AS TIME, VOLUNTEERS AND SUPPLIES WOULD ALLOW.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TULSA WORLD



BOARDING A BUS ON AN EARLY FEBRUARY MORNING this year, Tulsa Tech dental assistant students didn't know quite what to expect. Upon arriving at their worksite a short time later, they quickly realized they were in for a long, busy, crazy day. For many of them, the next two days would be hectic. A group of 41 Tulsa Tech students and two instructors committed a total of 485 volunteer hours to the Mission of Mercy (www.okmom.org), a free, two-day dental clinic co-sponsored by the Oklahoma Dental Association, the Delta Dental of Oklahoma Charitable Foundation and the Oklahoma Dental Foundation; the clinic was held downtown at the Tulsa Convention Center.

The clinic was designed to meet the critical needs of dental patients of all ages by providing free dental care to as many adults and children as time, volunteers and supplies would allow. Would-be dental patients began assembling days before the event began, some sleeping in the parking garage for two nights, in anticipation of receiving free dental care from some 1,400 dentists, hygienists and volunteers; cleanings, fillings, restorations, extractions and root canals were provided to more than 1,800 patients.

Medical personnel evaluated patients' blood pressure and took a general health history to make sure prospective patients didn't have a fever at the time of treatment, or abnormally high, uncontrollable blood pressure, or excessive bleeding in the past. With the criteria that all dental work done at the Mission of Mercy had to be completed in a single visit, dentists

then identified the areas of greatest opportunity for each patient; patients then waited in bleachers to go down to the floor for treatment.

A Great Need

Dental Assistant instructor Jane Chandler organized the Tulsa Tech group's participation after finding out how many patients would likely present themselves for treatment. "There is a great need in Tulsa," remarked Chandler. "Tulsa County has the highest rate in the nation for third-graders with missing, decayed and restored teeth. For many of these families, preventive dental care just can't be a priority, and through Mission of Mercy, we had an opportunity to help."

Chandler called the Tulsa Tech students participating in Mission of Mercy "fearless," as many of them were participating in something they'd never dreamed of, much less experienced. "In general, I think younger students believe they can do just about anything," Chandler recalled. "Our students were eager to assist, and were unafraid of getting into a situation they weren't entirely comfortable with. Most of the dentists brought their own assistants, but when there was a call for additional assistants in oral surgery, Tulsa Tech's students ran to the area to have the opportunity to assist there and learn. They really stepped up."

Early to Rise

As this was the first Oklahoma Mission of Mercy, Tulsa Tech students had no idea what to expect, but quickly got into the swing of things on a very busy first day.

"When we got there, I looked at the

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number of patients and thought, "There's no way we're going to get through all these people," recalls Kristin Fletcher, a student originally from El Reno, Oklahoma. Fletcher spent more than 13 hours Friday taking patients to anesthesia, the restoration area and surgery center. "As the day went on, the numbers dwindled. I was with one of the very last patients waiting for X-rays," continued Fletcher. "I was afraid they were going to tell her 'no' because she needed all her wisdom teeth extracted, but they did it."

Another of Fletcher's patients stood out for a different reason. "There was a man who was in his 30s coming for some restorations, and he talked about how he had been in pain for so long," Fletcher explained. "He didn't have dental insurance and didn't have the money to go get any work done. But when he left, he was in tears. He gave the dentist and me a hug, and it was really, really cool. Needless to say, I would definitely participate in a Mission of Mercy event again."

The long days and intense workload created a once-in-a-lifetime circumstance for future dental assistants like Shelby Heimbach, a student from the city of Broken Arrow.

"It was so rewarding being able to help people in need," said Heimbach. "For many of the patients I saw, money was the big issue."

The real-life, hands-on experience was invaluable for Heimbach and her



▲ Hundreds of volunteers, including Tulsa Tech Dental Assistant students and instructors, provided dental care for more than 1,800 people in need at the Oklahoma Mission of Mercy.

classmates. "It was challenging to work with so many different people over the course of two days because every dentist is so different," commented Heimbach. "While it was challenging adjusting to how each goes about providing their care, it was such a great opportunity to learn."

Heimbach says the most rewarding part was being able to help people in need. "These people aren't necessarily

here because previous dental work was bad, but because they are unable to provide dental care for themselves—whether it's for medical reasons or lack of access to insurance or not having the money to pay for it," she observed. "Being able to provide this care is incredibly wonderful."

Fulfilling a Dream

Mary Selsor, a student from Broken Arrow, has wanted to be a dental assistant



Tulsa Tech dental assistant students get hands-on experience through Oklahoma's first Mission of Mercy.

in an orthodontist's office ever since she had braces as a young teenager. "I like all of it," Selsor said. "I love what some might call the tedium of dental assisting; I like the intricate detail and the need for organization."

For Selsor, one patient stood out from the others. "This lady's front teeth were rotted out except for the outer portions, and the teeth next to those were pretty decayed too," said Selsor. "She didn't smile and was very insecure, but the dentist I

was working with rebuilt her front teeth. When I asked her if she was ready to see her new beautiful smile, she got really nervous. I handed her the mirror, and she just started bawling. And then I started bawling! That was by far the most rewarding part of the entire weekend." Instructor Jill Holland was impressed with her students' performance at the Mission of Mercy.

"Dentists and organizers told me how professional our students were," recalled Holland. "One of our students carried himself so well that he was confused with a fourth-year dental student and was asked to administer local anesthesia."

Holland was also impressed with the networking opportunities for her students. "They worked alongside practicing dentists, hygienists, assistants, Oklahoma University (OU) dental students, OU dental hygiene students and Tulsa Community College dental hygiene students," said Holland. "After several hours of work in the anesthesia area, one of the students realized she had been working in conjunction with the dean of the Oklahoma University Dental School. The mission was a wonderful service opportunity, but it also gave our students a chance to get practical experience in a real-life, rapid-fire situation."

A Successful Mission

Post-mission, four Tulsa Tech students have been offered jobs in dental facilities, and six students have been offered clinical internships. Four dentists requested information about becoming a clinical site for students in the future. The 2011 Mission of Mercy will take place in Oklahoma City; in 2012, McAlester. "Tulsa Tech students will participate," said Holland. "In southeast Oklahoma, the need will be huge, and we can't wait to help." **I**

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